

Dumps On... and

by Lt. Colin McLean

Flying magazine runs a monthly column called “I learned a lot about flying from that”—stories describing hard-learned lessons. I could call the following yarn “I learned a lot about carrier aviation from that.”

We were in the middle of carrier quals at the beginning of WestPac. As the senior lieutenant, I flew out to the ship with the squadron’s last Hawkeye. We expected to enter the pattern immediately. Instead, we got overhead mother and held for three hours while the rest of the air wing worked the day, Case II pattern. We had trouble with our TACAN, and, finally, as the sun set, we took vectors to penetrate toward the initial. No need to dump fuel. When I got to the initial, the boss told the plane guard helo, “Take close aboard.”

“No chance of finishing CQ today,” I thought to myself. At least I’d get a good night’s sleep.

On the second day at sea, once again, we got the runaround in the day pattern. After five hours of flight time, most of it overhead, we finally finished day CQ. After shutting down, a quick trip to the wardroom, and a short brief, we were back in the airplane and heading toward the marshal stack for some nighttime fun. Air ops told us to expect to hold in marshal and wait for the rest of the air wing guys to finish their night passes. No big surprise there. In fact, there were two marshal stacks—we were in the bottom of the secondary stack with another Hummer and a COD. Maintenance had filled our fuel tanks, so we made ourselves at home.

We were surprised to get vectors to come down the chute first. Our fuel state was 6,000 pounds above max trap (4,300 pounds). We began dumping fuel and commenced the approach from 6,000 feet. In our squadron, the mission commander in the aircraft announces each minute that passess while we’re dumping fuel. The

Photo modification by Patricia Eaton

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airplane doesn't dump well in a descent, so as we leveled off at 1,200 feet, we were at 8,800 pounds. The mission commander told us, "Dumps on—two minutes." I rogered him, and we passed 12 miles. The overcast was 1,500 feet, and there was no moon. On top of that, we didn't have bullseye. Passing eight miles, I slowed the aircraft and transitioned to landing configuration.

"Dumps on—three minutes." Fuel state was 7,700 pounds. As we approached six miles, my copilot started looking for the drop-down lights to help me with lineup. We saw lights in the distance, but nothing recognizable.

"Dumps on—four minutes." Fuel state was 6,600 pounds. We finished the landing checklist. I slowed the airplane to on-speed. Without ACLS needles or bullseye, I was struggling to find centerline. My copilot was still looking outside for the drop-down lights, but he couldn't find them. The approach controller didn't help much, either. I asked my copilot to tell the controller that the drop-down lights weren't on. The approach controller rogered us.

Approaching four miles, I heard, "Dumps on—five minutes." Fuel state was now 5,600 pounds. At three miles, we finally picked up ACLS needles, but

we still couldn't see either the drop-down lights or landing area lights. The mission commander told us he was going "cold mike" and opening the ditching hatch in the CIC. It is SOP in the community to open this prior to any carrier landing. Otherwise, in the event we have to ditch, the hatch may become stuck in an airframe that has been bent from impact. With the wind whistling into the aircraft, the mission commander's ICS had to be "cold mike" for the rest of the crew to talk. I rogered him and asked the copilot to once again notify the approach controller that the landing area and drop-down lights weren't lit. I was working hard to fly the needles, and I would have felt more comfortable on a dark night with those lights visible.

Finally, at a mile and a half, the lights came on. I was above glideslope and right of centerline, but at least I could see where I was supposed to land. Then, my copilot said, "The dumps are still on." I cursed to myself and turned them off. Our fuel state was 3,700 pounds. We called the ball. I can't even remember my pass.

Luckily, we were above hold-down, albeit by only 200 pounds. We headed straight to the cat, and I got my second pass of the night before we were sidelined for gas.

We had been distracted, and could have continued dumping fuel until we were below bingo. In debriefing the flight, we realized that a lot of things added to our distraction. We hadn't flown at night at the ship in a month and a half, which compounded anything we confronted. Everyone in the aircraft is responsible for aircrew coordination, but the aircraft commander directs the focus of the entire crew. I was too worried about the drop-down lights and centerline to remember the fuel dump. I remember the Eastern Airlines DC-10 crew that we study in ACT courses; they flew into the Everglades because they were trying to fix a faulty light. It's amazing how easily aircrew coordination degrades, and I'm glad we didn't end up in extremis. 🦅

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